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Tapping Their Language — A Bridge to Success

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Introduction

"Con la vara que midas, seras medido." We are all influenced by our societal perception in general and by our perceptions of individuals in particular. How we judge others is usually how we are judged. If we are suspicious of others we are considered suspicious persons. If we perceive others in racist terms we will be considered racists. If we look for the good in others we will be judged as

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humanistic and humble. Societal perceptions begin to form early in life. Each year a class of kindergarten students enters our public schools and will be labeled by teachers based on preconceived notions about the students' potential. These notions have been ascribed in students on the basis of variables such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic level. Ethnic minority literature can be used to communicate or reinforce positive attitudes. This is particularly true when referring to language minority children such as Chicanos who are generally perceived unfavorably in society and in school. By tapping their language and their cultural roots these mistaken perceptions can be dispelled. "*Donde hablan letras, callan barbas.*"

This article will identify some misconceptions relating to bilingual education programs and limited English proficient (LEP) children. The term bilingual education encompasses a variety of bilingual program designs. For the purpose of this paper, bilingual education will be equated with transitional bilingual education, the most common program model currently implemented in the U.S. Basically, the Spanish language is used initially to impart literacy while English is gradually added until a student makes the transition to total instruction in English — a process that takes from 2-5 years, depending on the sociolinguistic characteristics of the school and community served by the program. Included is a theoretical base that promotes tapping the children's native language. This theoretical base enables educators to make the curriculum more accessible to LEP children. It also clarifies the relationship between oral language development and language as the means to acquire literacy and academic skills. Keeping in focus the need to learn English, the theoretical base will be discussed as a transfer tool. Finally, practical examples will be presented as viable avenues for tapping the native language.

Clarifying Misconceptions About Bilingual Programs

Because of their limited English skills, many people and, sadly amongst them, educators, perceive LEP children in bilingual education as academically deficient and in need of a special remedial program to prepare them for the mainstream curriculum. This belief labels LEP children as "Special Education" recipients without the capabilities of normal children. This special education perception reinforces negative assumptions and hence low school and community expectations.

The focus needs to shift from bilingual education to the LEP student's ability to perform at certain stages of development. Bilingual education must and

should be evaluated as a program for normal children who have the ability to perform at the same academic level as all-English mainstream children. The assumption that English is a prerequisite to literacy must be readjusted to the notion that literacy is accessible through any language.

Bilingual education is distinct only in that it initiates instruction of skills and concepts in the native language while the child acquires the second language. Bilingual education is not different or special. It is, in fact, a mainstream program when one considers that it has the same objectives, the same curriculum, and the same skill expectations as any program for all-English mainstream children. A primary objective is to build English language proficiency to a level in which children can compete equally with mainstream children. The main issue for bilingual education should not be diminished to one of language use only. It should reflect the importance of literacy before and after LEP children gain oral proficiency in the second language.

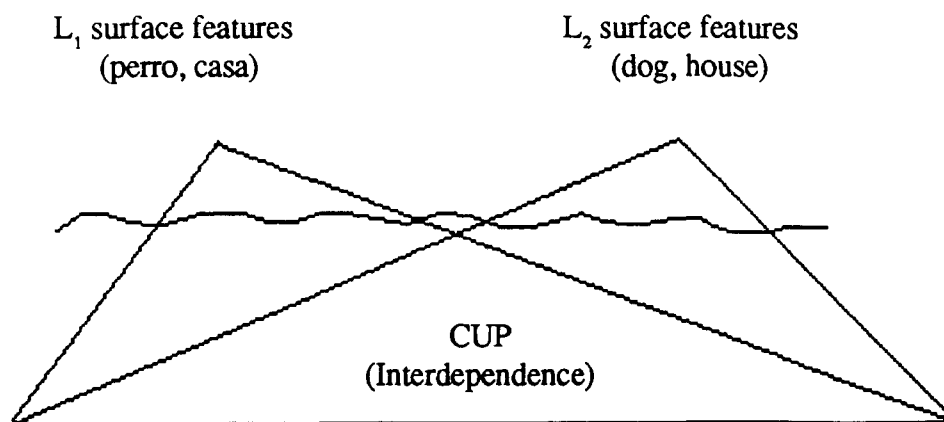
A Theoretical Foundation

To judge the language minority children's educational program more effectively, a better understanding of the relationship between the first and second language is needed. It is important to understand that a bridge links the first language to the second language. This bridge can better be explained by the Common Underlying Proficiency model (CUP) (Cummins, 1981). This model depicts language as a developmental process which begins with oral development in the native language and is followed by experiences in emergent literacy learning. As the student becomes an accomplished reader and writer, total literacy knowledge is realized. The process of transferring native language literacy skills into English is what Cummins calls the CUP model. Skills and concepts learned in the native language are manifested in English. The student exits the bilingual program and continues to develop academically in the mainstream English program without interruption. With a minimum amount of trauma, the LEP student has been able to keep abreast of the curriculum while gaining English literacy.

Cummins (1980) elaborates on the CUP Model by comparing it to a dual iceberg (Figure 1). First he distinguishes between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS are those phonological, syntactical, and lexical skills necessary to function in everyday interpersonal communication contexts that are universal among all native speakers of that language. CALP, however, is the language

proficiency needed for cognitive and academic tasks related to literacy. Cummins uses the iceberg in Figure 1 to depict the relationship between BICS and CALP.

Figure 1. CUP Model (Dual Iceberg).

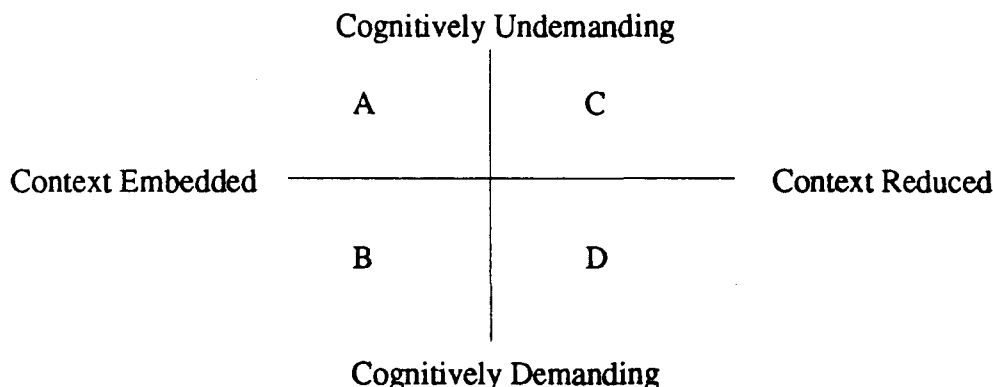


The surface features of the first language (L_1) and the second language (L_2) are obviously different because of their unique lexical, phonological, and syntactic differences. However, below the surface, the CALP features, which contain the context for academic and literacy skills, are interdependent and transferable between L_1 and L_2 ; hence they have a common underlying proficiency. In other words, all concepts, as well as skills such as reading comprehension that are learned once in the native language do not have to be relearned in English. For the LEP student it is a simple matter of learning a new term for an already familiar concept.

Cummins (1981) later redefined CALP and BICS to reflect the contextual cues that are available to the children as they attempt to acquire the L_2 (Figure 2). This change better clarifies the linguistic expectations of the children and also helps teachers categorize the curriculum based on the cues it contains (oral vs. written). BICS was redefined at one end of the continuum as Context-embedded and Cognitively-undemanding. The notion is that face-to-face communication is embedded with many contextual cues which are available to the children. They can actively negotiate meaning through cues exchanged to clarify meaning, i.e., gestures, intonation, situations. The message is more easily accessible, and the children do not have to exert much cognitive energy to

comprehend it.

Figure 2. Range of Contextual Support and Cognitive Involvement.



At the other end of the continuum, CALP was redefined as Context-reduced and Cognitively Demanding. Here the message relies heavily on linguistic cues to meaning and can be identified with literacy skills. Reading comprehension is a highly context-reduced and cognitively-demanding activity because of the difficulty in deciphering the cues which in turn strain the cognitive domain. Using the quadrants in Figure 2, the context can be identified by the number of cues that are available depending on the activity in which the children participate.

This theoretical base can help the reader realize the difficulty that LEP children can have acquiring literacy skills in L_2 and how important the bridge with L_1 becomes. The CUP Model promotes the development of proficiency underlying both languages. The more proficient bilingual children are in L_1 , the faster they will acquire the cognitively demanding aspects of L_2 . Because of their experience in L_1 , they can also process context-reduced material in L_2 more proficiently. The interdependence of L_1 and L_2 is, therefore, a manifestation of a common underlying proficiency. This concept is borne out by immigrant students who come to the United States with literacy skills already well developed. When they enter school, they are usually able to succeed academically once they learn English (González, 1989).

The principal purpose of the González study was to investigate the effects of first language education on the second language and academic achievement of Mexican immigrant children in the United States. He examined context-reduced and context-embedded language skills in immigrant children who had been totally educated in the United States (Group US). He compared them to children

who had a minimum of two years of education in Mexico before immigrating to the United States (Group M).

The most significant result showed that when immigrant children had learned how to read and write in their native country, they were able to transfer those skills to English and perform equally as well as they did in Spanish. In addition, Group M outperformed Group US in English reading comprehension, despite the fact that Group US had been totally educated in the United States. The findings of this study support the existence and use of the common underlying proficiency theory.

These results validate the use of cognitive and academic criteria as the basis to exit children from bilingual programs, i.e., English reading comprehension, rather than relying solely on oral language development. Educators have to adjust their evaluation criteria to consider these developmental differences in the first language versus the second language before transferring LEP children from bilingual programs to regular mainstream programs. Context-reduced language skills (literacy) take longer to develop than do context-embedded language skills (oral language development). Program exits should occur when students are in the strongest position to prevail academically. This will ensure their successful transfer into the mainstream program.

The aforementioned theoretical base provides us the means by which to better tap the children's native language roots for developing reading and language arts skills. It is important to realize that children are in control of their own learning. Teachers can reinforce, encourage, support, and teach, but they do not control the individual's rate of learning. Teachers determine how the curriculum will be taught and how interesting it is, but only the child can internalize it. How comfortable and capable the child feels with the material increases the likelihood of learning.

One of the most important instructional skills the teacher can develop is how to motivate the children to learn. To motivate them the teacher must choose a methodology that involves the children. To stimulate such excitement in children the curriculum must be dynamic, colorful, and alive with characteristics with which they can relate.

In order to motivate the children to become personally involved in their learning, teachers need to include many of their cultural and linguistic characteristics in the curriculum. Literacy (reading, writing, and language arts) should be primarily organized for making sense of the world. Those features that are most familiar to the children can make the curriculum interesting, purposeful, and meaningful; thus, it becomes alive and manageable. In essence, the key is making the message more context-embedded.

Cultural and Linguistic Applications

Zintz (1977) expresses the necessity of incorporating the language and culture of the children. Language and culture are interdependent. Culture is the accumulated experience of a social group throughout time. The only way accumulated experiences can be recreated or interpreted is through language. As a consequence the native language and all life experiences are intertwined and in turn are expressed as reflections of the situations in which they were learned. By seeking out and using these cultural and linguistic features the teacher not only taps the language but also uses background information so children can better comprehend the lessons. The importance of background information in reading comprehension is emphasized by Pearson and Johnson (1978) and Pearson and Spiro (1982).

Children feel more comfortable with lessons that contain familiar expressions and stories. An example is a folk myth that is familiar to many Mexicans and Mexican Americans and which is found in some Latin American countries. The myth is called *La Llorona* or "The Wailing Woman" (Shular, Ybarra-Frausto, & Sommers, 1972). *La Llorona* is about a woman who is either crying, wailing, or yelling as she seeks out her lost child. In fact, it is difficult to pinpoint the original version of the story because it varies from place to place. *La Llorona* appearances never detail injuries to anyone, except by scaring them out of their skin. Parents many times use the myth to frighten children into behaving. Asking children to tell their version of the folk myth or their experience with *La Llorona* can encourage children to write detailed and fascinating stories with which they truly identify. By using the literature-based approach or the author's chair, other stories that reflect the culture can be incorporated. Some examples could include *The Day it Snowed Tortillas* and *Pedro and Diablo* by Joe Hayes or some stories from a book called *Palabra Nueva: Cuentos Chicanos* by Ricardo Aguilar, Armando Armengol, and Oscar U. Somoza.

Other relevant experiences that help make the curriculum more accessible are those with heroes and personalities. Parallel lessons using Abraham Lincoln and Benito Juarez, both considered liberators, or George Washington and Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, both considered fathers of their respective countries, can help the children discover similar personalities in their native culture who have become heroes in like fashion. Similarly, asking children to compare personalities in their school books to persons central to their life will help the children better comprehend and identify with generic stories that do not include their cultural referent.

Language experience activities lend themselves effectively to the use of cultural and linguistic features. Teachers can gain insight into children's likes and dislikes, life experiences, and significant people in their lives through this technique. Children may even provide feelings or preferences influenced by their culture that may help the teacher better understand them and provide better lines of communication with them.

Games, riddles, sayings, and other similar activities from the children's culture are ideal for tapping their language and making the curriculum more relevant. These cultural referents have been handed down from generation to generation, such as the Spanish version of "Eeny, Meeny, Miney, Mo" to choose children. Dividing the rhyme into syllables, the child with the last syllable is chosen "it." The rhyme can also be used as a tongue twister. The rhyme is as follows:

De tén, marín, de don Pingüé,
Cúcara, mácara, títere, fué
cuchara, salero, escondido tu dedo
Detrás del trastero
Pín, marín de don Pingüé
Cúcara, mácara, pípiri fué. (GISD, 1982)

Riddles can first be introduced as part of the Hispanic heritage and then be used in whole language activities. The children can be given three or four riddles at a time to solve. Different groups can present their interpretation to the class. They can then follow by making up their own riddles and sharing them with the class. Finally, the riddles can form the theme for story starters. Some of the riddles that are typical of the Hispanic culture are:

"¿Qué masca y masca y nunca traga?" (Tijeras)
What chews and chews and never swallows? (scissors)

"Si los amarras, se van, si los sueltas se quedan." ¿Qué son? (zapatos)
If you tie them, they leave, if you loosen them they stay.
What are they? (shoes)

"Las eché blancas y cuando las saqué salieron pintas." (las tortillas)
When I placed them, they were white and when I removed

them they were spotted. (tortillas)

“¿Qué hacen doce gatos en el sótano?” (una docena)
What do twelve cats make in the basement? (one dozen)

“Chiquita como un ratón, guarda la casa como un león.” (la llave)
Small like a mouse, guards the house like a lion. (Key)

The Spanish language is rich and flowery, and the use of sayings is one quality that has made it so. Many persons use sayings often in their everyday conversation. As a consequence, children are familiar with many sayings. They are an integral part of the language and culture. Some of the most able users of sayings are the elderly who through oral tradition hand down this aspect of our culture and language to their children. This tradition can be used to the benefit of the children as it is tapped for a more relevant curriculum.

One method of integrating sayings into the lesson is to link their use to the teaching of context clues to understanding the message. Another method is to have the children create stories in which sayings are used appropriately. They can learn the parallel sayings in English for ESL lessons or create their own sayings. Some examples of familiar sayings are:

“Ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente.”
What you don’t know can’t hurt you.

“Más vale tarde que nunca.”
Better late than never.

“De lo dicho a lo hecho hay un gran trecho.”
It’s easier said than done.

“El hombre propone y Dios dispone.”
Man proposes and God disposes.

Superstitions are fascinating and appropriate for children’s investigation. They can find the roots of the superstitions and their historical background. They can interview family members, particularly older family members, to discover whether they experienced the influence of superstitions. Finally, the children can identify present day superstitions and their influence on families, sports, etc.

Some superstitions translated to English are:

"A copper bracelet will cure rheumatism."

"If the house cat is licking itself, you will have company."

"A necklace made of coral on a baby's neck will prevent anyone from giving the child the evil eye (mal de ojo).

"If you see a white crow among all the black crows, it means that someone is going to die."

"Itch in the palm of your hand means you'll get some money."

"When you admire a baby too much, you can give it the evil eye."

Fables are another important part of culture and many of these reflect culture very vividly. Using their background information the children will be able to identify with the story. Vocabulary as well as inferential skills can be developed. Asking the children to find the moral of the story will cause them to reflect and become familiar with the vocabulary as a source of context. Children will become more insightful and use the prior knowledge that comes from their culture to make better and more accurate predictions. At the same time the children's literature is being used.

Eleanor Thonis in her book *The English Spanish Connection* (1983) identifies the transferable language and skills in Spanish. She reminds us that cognates are words that are related through the same origins. Both Spanish and English originate from Latin roots, so they share words that vary slightly in spelling but are easily recognizable. The meaning of a word in Spanish that has the same root in English and similar word construct can be linked to support vocabulary development in English. Some examples are:

Spanish words ending in O which can be recognized by dropping the O:

defecto - defect acto - act cubano - cuban

Spanish words ending in "a" which can be recognized by dropping the "a":

artista - artist telegrama - telegram secreta - secret

Spanish words ending in "cia" can be recognized as "ce" ending words in English:

gracia - grace distancia - distance existencia-existence

Spanish words ending in cion can be recognized as tion words in English

educacion - education emoción - emotion nación - nation

Thonis identified transferable Spanish words to English based on their common ancestry.

Some other examples follow: (a) sion words merely drop the diacritical mark: confusion - confusion; (b) ismo words merely drop the "o": capitalismo/capitalism; (c) tud words merely add "e" in English aptitud/aptnitude; (d) cio words merely become ce in English: prefacio/preface; (e) "e" words merely

drop the “e” in English: residente/resident (pp. 197-198).

She does caution the reader that if the use of the bridge, the common underlying proficiency, is to be successful in the transfer process, the children must know the meaning of the term in their native language.

These and all the previously recommended activities follow the five recommendations that Gouthier and González (1990) propose for an effective reading program: (a) Read orally to the students; (b) use children’s literature in the reading program; (c) make use of prior knowledge; (d) have students make predictions; (e) and have students engage in cooperative learning.

Their article explains that no matter what biases or controversies exist in reading, some basic skills transcend and enhance the development of good readers. These suggestions should be useful in any program whether it is a mainstream program or a bilingual program.

In summary, this article has attempted not only to identify a recognizable theoretical base and some research to support it, but has identified relevant material that can be used as a basis for tapping the Hispanic children’s language. Cultural references were used as features that are central to language and need to be included. Authorities in reading have emphasized the need to use children’s experiences to strengthen the reading and language arts curriculum. An attempt has been made to respond to that need by providing guidance in at least two important areas:

1. Identify a foundation that uses background knowledge as a major determinant of text comprehension in English.
2. Provide examples of culturally and contextually relevant material that can tap children’s prior experiences and contribute to an understanding of the material being read.

This article is an attempt to reach teachers in the hope that they will use the culture and employ it as a beginning in the process of empowering language minority children in their quest to become mainstream children and not children at risk of educational failure.

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